

# LOST PARADISE

Located about 40km north of Lamu is a tropical paradise, complete with swaying palm trees, striated blue green waters, and white powder sand beaches. It boasts the Kiunga National Marine Reserve, containing all manner of aquatic life, including sharks, eels, rays, turtles and fish. But as **Jill Craig** discovered on a recent visit, this tourist Mecca is missing one crucial element – the tourists. After a British woman was kidnapped and her husband murdered at a resort in 2011, holidaymakers have chosen to book their trips elsewhere



Scuba divers are always looking for the next great dive site. So when the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) contacted the Nairobi Dive Club to train a few of their staff members on how to dive, along with some Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and Administration Police (AP) officers, the answer was a definite “Yes.” The club would bring the instructor, an assistant, and some other divers for the weeklong open water dive certification course, while WWF would provide accommodation at its research facility in Mkokoni, on the mainland opposite Kiwayu Island.

Of course, the trip advertisement to dive club members was not without disclaimer, which read as follows, “Please note that the location is next to the border of Somalia so if you want to join, you will have to waive all responsibilities and liability for the club and the organisers. The club and the organisers cannot be held responsible for anything that might happen...” Essentially, we were on our own.

Six of us accepted the challenge. We suspected that diving that close to the Somali border – roughly 20 kilometres from the main dive site – would yield thriving marine life since far fewer fishing vessels now trawled these waters.

After a full two days of travel, including the drive from Nairobi to Lamu and a one-and-a-half-hour speedboat ride from Lamu to Mkokoni, we arrived at the WWF facility by nightfall. At dinner, we began discussing security issues with some of the guys who worked there.

### The Kidnapping(s)

British tourists Judith and David Tebbutt checked into the Kiwayu Safari Village (KSV) on Sept. 11, 2011; they were the only guests. That evening, six gunmen burst into their room, fatally shooting Mr. Tebbutt and

kidnapping his wife to Somalia.

Kenyan KSV worker Ali Babitu Kololo reported the crime to police, claiming he was forced, at gunpoint, to lead the attackers to the Tebbutts’ room. A trail of footprints in the sand suggested the gang had looked into other bandas before finding the visitors. The Kenyan military became involved in rescuing Mrs. Tebbutt, but were unable to cross the border into Somalia. British police officers were dispatched to assist in the investigations.

A week later, Kololo was charged with kidnapping and violent robbery. On October 2011, Somali gunmen kidnapped 66-year-old Frenchwoman Marie Dedieu from her residence in Lamu. She died a few weeks later.

After more than six months in Somali captivity, Mrs. Tebbutt was released and flown to Nairobi on March 21, 2012, once her family had paid the rumored USD \$1.1 million ransom.

Investigators believe that the Tebbutts’ attackers were Somali pirates simply looking for money, not members of al-Shabaab. Others believe they were just thugs, since pirates usually prefer hijacking ships due to the added value of the vessel and cargo. According to some of the locals in Mkokoni, the criminals likely sold Mrs. Tebbutt to the highest bidder in Somalia, who might have been pirates.

Regardless, the end result of these attacks was an immediate chilling effect on tourism in the area.

### The Initial Briefing

Knowing that the KSV kidnapping had taken place less than 2 kilometres down the beach from where we were staying, we were all a bit apprehensive. I immediately asked our host if we faced a real security risk. He non-conclusively answered, “Banditry, yes; wildlife, no; everything else, we hope not.”

He continued by saying that we were reasonably safe because armed KWS rangers were sharing our compound and therefore, that presented a hurdle for would-be kidnappers. And because Kenyan forces are now stationed at the border, the attackers would be unable to easily abscond into Somalia with their victims, as they had previously.

I was then informed that “everyone” knew we were there. Even before we left Lamu, people knew that a group was headed for Mkokoni, because we were in the WWF boat. It was impossible to make our whereabouts more covert. Although we had mitigated risk as much as possible, there were no assurances; it seemed unlikely that anything could happen, but there was always a chance.

“Of course,” our host concluded, “let’s be honest. You’re still safer here than in Nairobi.”

### A Visit to Kiwayu Safari Village

The next afternoon, I walked down the beach to Kiwayu Safari Village, which had closed shortly after the 2011 incident. As I dodged the ubiquitous pink crabs emerging from the sand and struggling against the tide, I began to feel a bit anxious, going to visit the place where such tragedy had occurred less than a year and a half ago.

At a resort where rates started at around USD \$600 per night during low season and USD \$1,000 per night during high season, and which often hosted the likes of royals and celebrities, the kidnappers knew they were targeting a wealthy crowd. Now, as I peered into the bandas lining the beachfront, all I saw were the skeletons of Swahili beds and thatched makuti furniture suggesting former days of eco-opulence. Thatched flooring had been pulled up and haphazardly thrown here and there. Despite

Sea turtles (left) and bull sharks (right) are just some of the marine life to be fascinated and frightened by. Below, left to right: View of the bay from the Tebbutts’ now-demolished banda at Kiwayu Safari Village; Judith Tebbutt shortly after being released from captivity.



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Photographs: Jill Craig, Getty/Thinkstock

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the current disarray of the bandas, it was easy to picture visitors finding peace and serenity from their verandahs overlooking the shimmering waters of the horseshoe bay.

An askari named Haji offered to show me the banda where the Tebbutts had stayed, so I followed him past the others until we reached one that had been leveled to the ground. All that remained were some remnants of thatched flooring. He informed me that shortly after the incident, management had decided to tear the whole thing down. Pointing to the place where the bed had once stood, he then gestured to the back of the banda to show where the attackers likely entered. It was unnerving to imagine how horrific it must have been for Mrs. Tebbutt to witness her husband fighting the intruders in the darkness of the night, before she was bundled off to Somalia.

Haji said that the event has also taken a huge toll on the local Aweer (Boni) and Banjuni communities, who previously relied almost exclusively upon the resort for their livelihoods. They used to supply seafood, transport, and other goods and services to KSV, but that all came grinding to a halt after the attack. Without tourists, they are in desperate need of a decent income.

So although the security threat is hampering the yearning of vacationers to experience one of the most stunningly gorgeous places on the planet, it is also inflicting daily pain upon the local people who depend on the tourism industry to support themselves and their families.

## The Diving

The next morning, replaying in our minds the discussion of the dangers we faced on land, we were given a short dive briefing on what lurked under water. We were warned that if a bull shark was circling above, we should descend further since they can be aggressive but likely would not pursue us in deeper waters. If the boat captain saw a bull shark, he would rev the engine three times – the emergency alert – and we would stay down. After googling “bull shark” to see what we were dealing with, I realised in horror that it looked too similar to Jaws for my liking.

We were also informed that if we spotted any triggerfish, we should slowly swim away with our fins facing them. Triggerfish are the bane of divers around the world, thanks to their sharp teeth and territorial natures. If you make the unfortunate mistake of swimming too close to one’s nest, which extends in a cone shape from the nest to the surface, it will attack. Our instructor informed us that he had seen divers with little chunks taken out of their fins after learning this fact the hard way.

At this point, it seemed that everything wanted to harm us. We only half-joked that the captain should also give the emergency alert if he spotted pirates in the area. We would then stay underwater and hope he would throw down an extra air tank or two as we waited. Our underwater alert signal for pirates would be to place one hand over an eye (patch) while flapping the other one

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up and down over the alternate shoulder (parrot). We conjectured that the authors of the diving course manual had never considered this location-specific signal. Our nervous laughter seemed a better alternative to a nervous breakdown.

So after the WWF, KWS and AP officers finished their dive instruction that week, we all jumped into the speedboat to enjoy some fun dives in the crystal clear waters of Kiunga. Taking the boat about 17 kilometres out, we found a dive site called “Chongo Chamongo Sherif,” which apparently just means “outer reef.”

After dealing with a bit of seasickness due to rough waves, we looked starboard and saw a whale shark swimming next to our boat en route to the dive site. The whale shark is the biggest fish in the sea, so spotting one

is a real treat. Stopping abruptly, we quickly attempted to kit up and jump into the water to swim alongside it, but were too late. It was already gone. With our group, a whale shark might as well be a unicorn; it’s just that awe-inspiring. As the Nairobi Dive Club captain often says, “When you see a whale shark out there, it’s every man for himself.” Oh, how true it is. In the mad rush to grab snorkels and fins, you better hope that your equipment is not within easy reach of someone else, as they will steal whatever is closest and jump in the water.

Excited to have seen this vast creature – the average adult whale shark is between 5 and 10 metres long and can weigh more than 18 tonnes – we continued to the site and rolled off the boat for our first dive. Quickly surrounded by zebrafish, angelfish, lizardfish, bottom-gliding manta rays, gigantic Napoleon wrasses, pilot fish

swarming potato groupers, sea turtles, lobsters, starfish, we even spotted a moray eel poking its head out of a crevice. The diving was simply magical.

## The One Sure Thing

After we clawed and flopped our way back onto the boat and were returning to shore, we noticed a large catamaran called “Kaskazi” anchored nearby. Our boat captain was apparently a friend of its captain, and we were invited for a tour while we waited for the owners to finish up their

swim near the beach at KSV. Upon returning, the Spanish/Italian couple introduced themselves as Maria and Francesco. They told us they lived in Lamu, but were just spending the weekend in Kiunga. We asked if they were afraid to be alone in this area and Francesco responded, “No. We love this place. Why should we let the pirates decide our lives?”

As we disembarked from their boat and zipped back to the research facility, we saw the KWS patrol boat speeding off toward them. I asked our guide what was happening, immediately fearing the worst. Instead, I learned that there was at least one thing we could count on here.

“Don’t forget this is a national marine reserve,” he responded. “KWS is collecting their park fees.” **D**